

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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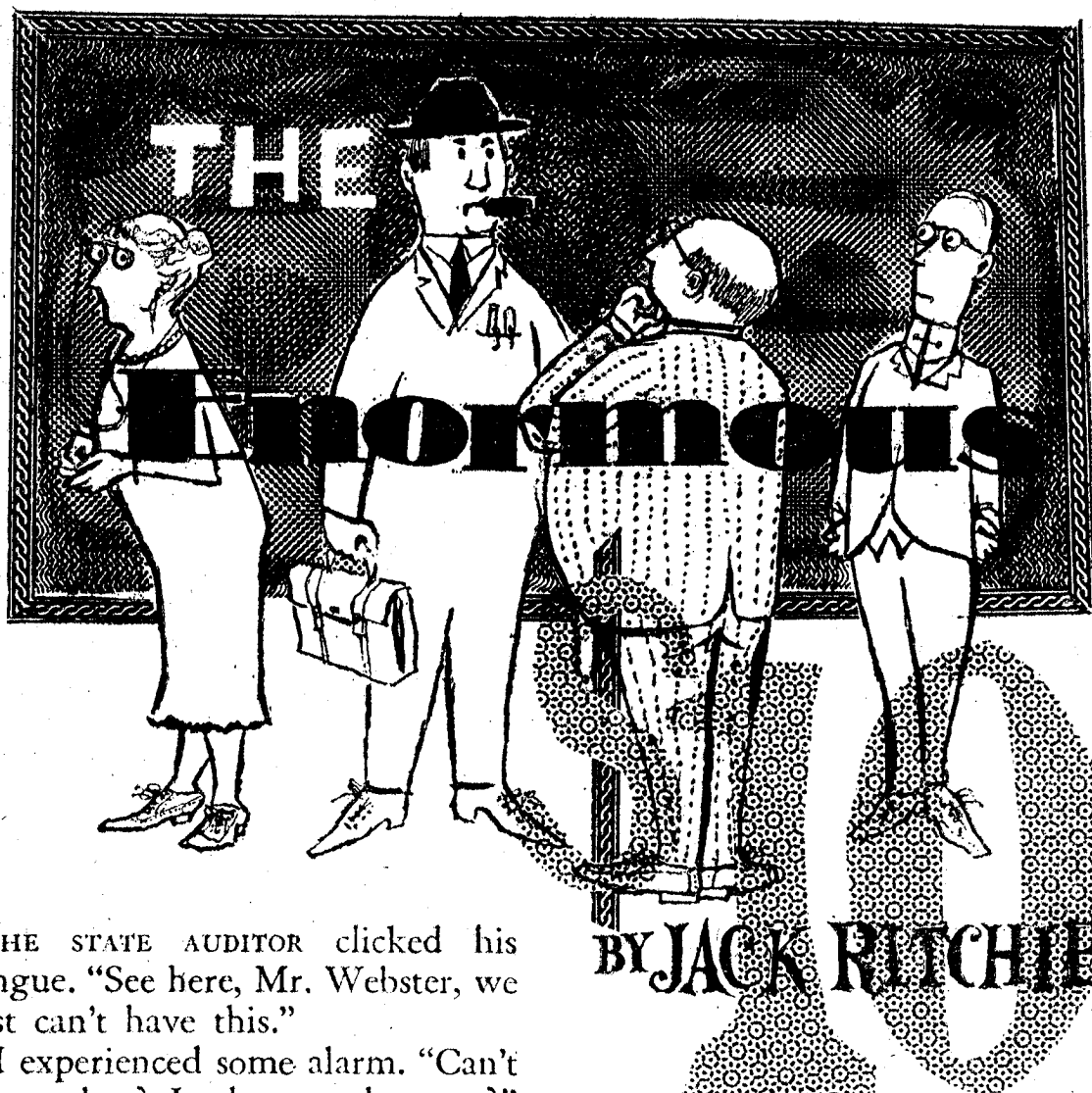
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**T**HE STATE AUDITOR clicked his tongue. "See here, Mr. Webster, we just can't have this."

I experienced some alarm. "Can't have what? Is there a shortage?"

He shook his head. "Not that. But your bank has ten dollars more than it's supposed to have."

I leaned back in my swivel chair. "Well, that's nothing to worry

about. As long as we're not short."

He wagged a finger. "You can't dismiss it so lightly, Mr. Webster. You know very well that your

*Take my word for it, banks are beautiful. Their floors are of marble; their pens work; their armed guards are indescribably ornamental. And their fragrance, laddies, is the fragrance of money.*

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books have to balance to the penny. The very last penny."

I smiled ingratiatingly. "Now, Mr. Stuart, after all it's just ten . . ."

He set his lips. "I'll have to make a report to the commission."

I sat up. "But, Mr. Stuart, there'll be an investigation."

"Do you have anything to hide?"

"Of course not," I said stiffly. "My books are in perfect order."

"More than that," he said dryly. "You've got ten dollars too much in your cash reserves." He lit a thin cigar. "You've got to face it, Mr. Webster. Somebody's been putting money into your vault and perhaps—"

"Impossible," I said firmly. "Both Mr. Barger and Mrs. White have been with me for years. I trust them implicitly."

His face remained skeptical. "Are they your only employees?"

I nodded. "We're a small town bank."

"And they both have access to the vault?"

"Yes," I admitted. "But I just can't conceive that any one of them would do something like that."

"Nevertheless, one of them is guilty."

I thought it over. "Are you absolutely certain you made no mistake?"

His teeth clamped the cigar. "I never make a mistake."

I brooded a few moments more. "Mr. Stuart, you have been audit-

ing my books for ten years. This is the first time you've found anything wrong."

He nodded.

"Well, just for old time's sake, couldn't you go over the books again tomorrow? Merely to be positive before you send in your report?"

He tasted the idea and then spoke grudgingly. "All right. I'll come back tomorrow. Nine o'clock, on the dot."

When he was gone, I walked into the bank proper. It was after hours, but Mr. Barger and Mrs. White were still at the desks behind the walnut railing.

"You know what Mr. Stuart found?" I asked.

They nodded and looked down at their folded hands.

"You realize what this means," I said. "There'll be an investigation. Word will get out that we do sloppy bookkeeping. I wouldn't be surprised if there's a run on the bank."

Their eyes still avoided me.

"I just can't understand it," I said. "Both of you have been with me more than twenty years. I thought that we were more than just employer and employees. I thought we were friends."

Mrs. White swallowed. She had graying hair and she was a grandmother eight times over.

"I don't know which one of you is responsible," I said. "Or what circumstances prompted you to do

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something like that. However, since it is, after all, only a matter of ten dollars, I think we can easily rectify the matter right now."

Hope came to their faces.

I smiled. "Luckily, I managed to persuade Mr. Stuart to agree to come back tomorrow for a re-check. And now I'll simply step into the vault and remove a ten dollar bill. Thereby our cash reserves will be at their proper level."

The light faded from their eyes.

"It isn't actually stealing," I said quickly. "I'll give the ten to the Red Cross or some other worthy charity."

Barger was a thin stooped man a few years older than Mrs. White. He cleared his throat. "It isn't that, Mr. Webster. But I just closed the vault and set the time clock. It won't open again until nine o'clock tomorrow morning."

I exhaled and closed my eyes.

Mrs. White spoke. "Perhaps we could take out the ten dollars in the morning?"

"No," I said wearily. "Stuart said he'd be here at nine. I've never known him to be late."

In the evening, I was in my apartment over Hanson's drugstore, when my door buzzer sounded.

It was Barger and he removed his hat. "Could I talk to you, Mr. Webster?"

"Of course, Henry. Come in."

We went into the living room and I turned off the television set.

Barger sat down on the edge of a chair and put his hat on his knees. "I've been thinking things over and I wouldn't want you to be thinking that Mrs. White could be responsible for the bank's troubles." He gulped and had difficulty continuing. "Mr. Webster, I'm the one who put the ten dollars in our cash reserves."

I think my eyes widened. "But, Henry, how could you do something like that?"

He looked down at the rug. "I didn't really mean to do it. It was an accident."

His fingers worked at the hat brim and his face was pale.

"Henry," I said soothingly, "would you care for some water?"

He shook his head. "No, thank you. I'll be all right in a minute."

After awhile I said, "How did it happen?"

He took a deep breath. "The races."

I frowned. "The races?"

"Yes. There's what they call a bookie joint over in Clinton. A pretty big place, Mr. Stuart. A dozen people or more talking at the telephones all the time. They take bets from all over, like New York and Philadelphia too."

The shock showed in my voice. "You played the horses?"

He hung his head. "There were hospital bills, and I was having trouble meeting the mortgage payments, and I don't really get much of a salary."

"I'm sorry about that, Henry," I said. "But you know that we're a small bank and. . ."

He held up a hand "Oh, I'm not complaining, Mr. Webster. I know how it is."

I sighed. "But Henry, you know you can't beat the horses."

He looked at the floor again. "First it was two dollars, then five, then ten. I had some winners, of course, but I kept getting in deeper and deeper."

I had a growing suspicion. "Where did you get the money?"

He licked his lips. "From the bank, Mr. Webster."

In the silence I could hear the refrigerator in the kitchen click on.

Barger's fingers turned the hat around two or three times. "Well, after I took about two thousand dollars, I realized that I'd never be able to re-pay the bank unless I made a killing."

"And so you took more money," I said grimly.

He nodded. "I made a two thousand dollar bet."

"And lost that too," I said. "That's the way it always. . ."

He interrupted. "No, Mr. Webster. My horse came in and paid ten to one. I took care of the hospital bills, paid off the mortgage, and replaced the money in the bank." He sighed. "I guess I just put back ten dollars too much."

There was nothing I could think of to say.

Now that Henry had confessed,

he seemed almost cheerful. "A week ago I washed the Venetian blinds at my house and all that night I dreamed of nothing but Venetian blinds, Venetian blinds." He smiled. "And you know what, Mr. Webster? The next morning when I looked at the racing form, there it was! Venusian Blonde, a filly in the third at Hialeah."

"That isn't exactly the same as Venetian blind," I said sourly.

"Mr. Webster," Barger said. "When you receive a message from up there, you don't quibble about the spelling."

He watched me rub my eyes. "I suppose you'll fire me?"

"I'd like to," I said gloomily. "But as long as the money's back in the bank. . ."

"And more," Barger said eagerly.

I began pacing the room. "Somehow we've got to get into that vault before Stuart does."

Barger contributed sympathetic and silent aid to my thinking and eventually an idea came to me. "I have it. We've simply got to see to it that Stuart isn't at the bank when the vault opens."

Barger was entirely in agreement. "Yes, Mr. Webster, but how?"

"When Stuart stops in town, he always takes a room at the Ames House. It's seven blocks from there to the bank and I know that he always walks."

Barger blinked happily. "Yes, Mr. Webster?"

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somehow on the way to the bank I'll develop motor trouble. I'll see to it that we don't arrive there until after nine."

Barger nodded. "And I'll be there when the vault does open, dash in, and take out ten dollars."

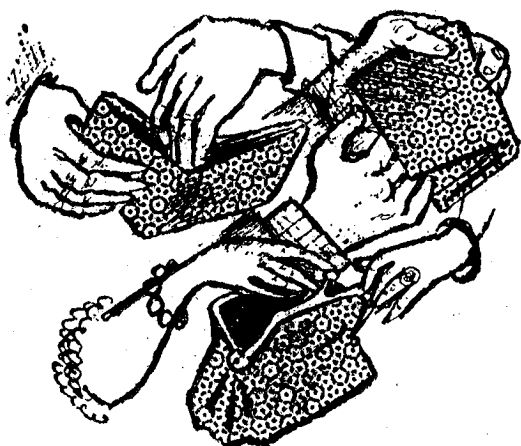
"But remember," I cautioned. "I may be able to give you only five minutes."

Then I frowned at him. "One thing, Henry. You've got to promise me that that's the last time you dip into the bank's money."

He put a hand over his heart. "Believe me, Mr. Webster, I've learned my lesson. It just doesn't pay to play the horses."

In the morning I was just finishing breakfast in Jake & Millie's Restaurant, when Mrs. White appeared in the doorway. She paused hesitantly until she saw me and then came to my table.

She sat down and clutched her purse. "Mr. Webster, I haven't been able to sleep all night. Just from worrying."



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"Mrs. White," I said. "I think we can stop worrying about this whole . . ."

"I've simply got to face up to it," she said. "I can't have you even thinking that Mr. Barger might be to blame."

I was about to take a sip of coffee, but the cup stopped halfway to my lips.

She looked at me with earnest blue eyes. "Mr. Webster, I'm the one who put the extra ten dollars in the vault."

I put down the cup.

"You see, Mr. Webster, I have six children, eight darling grandchildren, and I'm related to just about everybody in town."

I stared out of the window and waited.

"And, well, times aren't as good as they could be . . . and everybody needed a little help . . . now and then."

I sighed.

"Their credit ratings weren't really good enough for any one of them to get a legitimate loan from the bank, so . . . here and there . . . I would try to ease the way for them a little."

"How much did you take?"

"They're all really good people, Mr. Webster. God-fearing and deserving, and seeing as how I work in a bank where there's all kinds of money just lying . . ."

"How much?"

She took a firmer grip on the purse. "Two thousand five hun-

dred dollars and ninety-eight cents."

I felt a momentary curiosity about the ninety-eight cents, but dismissed it. "Mrs. White, you've been foolish, foolish."

She agreed contritely. "Twenty dollars here, thirty there. It all added up."

I shook my head. "And naturally not a single one of them ever paid back a cent."

She looked up. "But they did, Mr. Webster. Every one of them. And I thought I had kept track of all the money I took, but when I put it back, somehow an extra ten must have slipped in."

She straightened her shoulders. "I'll take full responsibility for the ten dollars. I've led a full life and have no regrets. I only hope they'll let my grandchildren visit me."

I was recovering slowly. "I don't think it will come to that."

"But you'll fire me, of course. I've broken a sacred trust."

"No," I said moodily. "I've already established a precedent."

"You'd be surprised how much good the money did instead of just mouldering away in that old vault," Mrs. White said. "Emmy was able to get a washer-dryer and she needs one so much with those three young children, and Mary Ann was able to get a dress for the high school prom. Her life would have been utterly ruined if she hadn't been able to raise the forty-five dollars and ninety-eight cents."

I glanced at my watch. "I think we'll be able to straighten everything out."

"Do you really think so, Mr. Webster?" she asked eagerly.

I patted her hand. "Yes. I'm going to pick up Mr. Stuart in my car and on the way to the bank I'm going to develop motor trouble." I winked. "And in the meantime Henry will be at the vault when it opens and he'll see to it that our cash reserves come down to their proper level."

Her eyes sparkled. "What a brilliant idea, Mr. Webster." Then she frowned slightly. "But you'd better hurry if you want to catch Mr. Stuart."

"Plenty of time," I said. "It's only quarter after eight."

She checked her small gold watch and then looked over my shoulder. "I'm afraid your watch is slow, Mr. Webster. According to the wall clock behind you and my watch, it's fourteen to nine."

I verified that and grabbed my hat. "We can still make it! But we've got to hurry."

We rushed out of the restaurant to my car parked at the curb and then we stopped.

It was about thirty seconds before I could talk.

"Mrs. White," I said wearily, "if you'll just take a seat in the car, I'll get at that flat tire."

We arrived at the bank ten minutes after nine.

Barger's face was pale. "Stuart

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was here when the vault opened. What happened, Mr. Webster?"

"Never mind," I said irritably. And then we sat down to wait.

The time passed slowly and our eyes followed the second hand of the electric clock go around and around.

At ten-thirty, Stuart stepped out of the vault, and his face was pink with embarrassment. "Just one of those things," he said. "Could have happened to anybody."

I sighed. "What could?"

He waved the pack of ten dollar bills in his hand. "Somehow one of these tens got folded in half and so when I went through the stack yesterday I counted the same bill twice. Both ends, you know." His laugh was almost a giggle. "If I'd leafed through the other end of the stack, it would have looked like you were ten dollars short."

Barger and Mrs. White and I looked at each other and then back

to the embarrassed, red-faced Stuart.

"It could happen to anybody," he said again.

I took a breath. "Then our cash reserve . . .?"

"At the proper level," Stuart said. "To the penny."

At noon I went back to Jake & Millie's for lunch and Mr. Sprague, who used to live in New York, sat down at my table.

He took out a pad and pen. "What's your horse for today?"

"None," I said. "I'm through playing the horses."

His face showed surprise. "Quit now? And just after you made a killing on Venusian Blonde? Ten thousand, wasn't it?"

"Nevertheless I quit," I said firmly and I meant it.

Playing the horses can be dangerous.

For awhile there, I thought I was the one who put the extra ten in the vault.



## Every Sunday

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